

# Review of Research on Exercise Design in Business Chinese Language Textbooks Since the 1990s

Meiqi Peng<sup>1,a,\*</sup>, Yutong Li<sup>2,b</sup>

<sup>1</sup>College of International Chinese Culture, East China Normal University, Shanghai, 200062, China

<sup>2</sup>College of International Chinese Language Education, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, 100091, China

<sup>a</sup>mickypeng7@gmail.com, <sup>b</sup>liyutong@mail.bnu.edu.cn

\*Corresponding author

**Abstract:** As global trade expands, proficiency in Chinese, especially in business settings, becomes increasingly vital. Embedded exercises within educational materials play a crucial role in reinforcing knowledge, refining skills, and enhancing comprehension. This article adopts a broad-to-specific approach, first providing an overview of research on exercises in international Chinese language textbooks and then focusing on a detailed review of exercise design in Business Chinese language textbooks, analyzing 282 papers published since the 1990s. By examining research on exercise development in Business Chinese textbooks, it provides valuable insights into the optimal trajectory for exercises in international Chinese language textbooks. Additionally, this article offers recommendations for the design of international Chinese business textbooks, advocating for the integration of multimedia technology, project-driven exercises, and the inclusion of emotional elements in textbook exercises.

**Keywords:** Business Chinese, Literature Analysis, Textbook, Exercise

## 1. Introduction

With the global expansion of internet connectivity and international trade, the ties between nations in politics, economics, and daily life have tightened. Consequently, the growing number of foreigners engaging in business activities in China has made Business Chinese a popular area of research in the field of teaching Chinese as a second language. Drawing inspiration from methodologies used in foreign language teaching, Business Chinese has emerged as a specialized form of Chinese language instruction since the 1980s. It is designed for foreigners and international students involved in economic activities such as business, investment, and real estate dealings with China<sup>[1]</sup>. This emergence has stimulated research aimed at developing effective practice exercises within Business Chinese textbooks. According to Wang Shan (2012), the concept of "exercise" in this field is multifaceted, encompassing both a dynamic process of continuous learning and structured language materials designed to facilitate language acquisition<sup>[2]</sup>. This dual perspective underscores the importance of integrating targeted practice exercises into Business Chinese textbooks, ensuring that learners not only engage actively in language practice but also have access to effective learning materials tailored to their language learning needs.

This article will primarily delve into the aspect of "exercise" within textbooks, specifically focusing on its role and design in the context of Business Chinese education. From this standpoint, it will conduct a thorough examination of the design of exercises in Business Chinese textbooks. The objective of this article is to explore three core questions: (1) what advancements has the academic community achieved in the research on exercise design in Business Chinese textbooks over the past three decades? (2) which specific areas within this research field require further development? (3) what emerging directions or innovative approaches can be identified for the design of exercises in future Business Chinese teaching?

## 2. Research on the Exercises in International Chinese Textbook

In the field of international Chinese education, research on exercises is often explored as part of textbook design. Therefore, before discussing the current state of exercise design in Business Chinese

language teaching materials, this article will first provide an overview of the overall situation of research on exercises in international Chinese teaching materials which will lay a more comprehensive foundation for the subsequent discussion on the following research.

### **2.1. Design Principles**

The academic community has historically prioritized the macro principles and processes involved in the development of international Chinese textbooks. This emphasis began to take shape in the mid to late 1980s, as evidenced by various influential discussions within academic circles. Central to these discussions is the belief that the compilation of teaching materials should be informed by an understanding of students' language elements and language skills. Zhao Jinming (1997) contends that exercises represent the exclusive means by which students can effectively turn language knowledge into practical language skills, to the extent that they might constitute the predominant aspect of textbooks. Based on this assertion, he formulates guiding principles for textbook development: Exercises should cover all teaching content; span various difficulty levels; address the training of different language skills; be stimulating and thought-provoking<sup>[3]</sup>. Tong Bingzheng (1991) emphasized the importance of diversifying exercise formats in the development of elementary Chinese language textbooks and proposed four main suggestions: Exercise designs should maximize the use of visual aids; Pronunciation exercises should be integrated with semantics; Sentence structure exercises should involve meaningful language activities; Functional exercises should consider context and identity<sup>[4]</sup>. Yang Huiyuan (1997) asserts that exercises should cater to the needs of students, teachers, classroom instruction, and skill development and advocates for the design of systematic exercises ranging from pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence practice to conversational and paragraph-level expression<sup>[5]</sup>.

Additionally, scholars have conducted research on exercise design in Chinese language textbooks for foreign learners and have found issues such as a lack of variety in exercise types, insufficient quantity, and repetitive design in the textbooks<sup>[6]</sup>. To address these issues, evaluation standards for exercise arrangement and assessment criteria for Chinese language teaching materials have been designed by the academic community. The problems concerning exercise content and styles have been discussed, providing models for exercise development<sup>[7][8]</sup>.

### **2.2. Forms of Exercises**

The quality of exercises directly impacts the quality of classroom teaching<sup>[9]</sup>. In addition to macro-level research on the state of exercise development in international Chinese language textbooks, there has been a gradual emergence of more specific studies focusing on exercises themselves. The academic community has engaged in discussions regarding the classification of exercises in international Chinese language textbooks. Deng Enming (1998) classified language teaching exercises into three types from a psychological perspective: language point exercises, text exercises, and communicative exercises<sup>[10]</sup>. Liu Songhao (1999) suggested classifying exercise forms based on the types of Chinese courses, such as intensive reading, spoken language, and reading comprehension<sup>[11]</sup>. Yang Jizhou (2003) further expanded the classification by delineating four types of exercises: comprehension-based, imitation-memory-based, intelligence-developing, and communicative exercises<sup>[12]</sup>. In response to different types of courses and the specific characteristics of various teaching materials, scholars have put forward several recommendations for exercise development in different course types<sup>[13][14]</sup>.

## **3. Research on Business Chinese Textbook**

### **3.1. Brief Review on Publication of Business Chinese Textbooks**

The compilation and publication of Business Chinese textbooks can be traced back to the early 1980s, and the initial stage was from 1980 to 1990. In 1982, the first business Chinese textbook "500 Phrases for Foreign Trade Negotiation" co-compiled by Beijing Language and Culture University and Beijing Institute of Foreign Trade came out. Since then, special business Chinese teaching began to appear in China. However, as a textbook intended for self-study by international students, its applicability is limited in scope. During the period from 1990 to 2000, there was a significant exploration in the development of business Chinese textbooks. However, as the earliest batch of business Chinese textbooks primarily emphasized oral foreign trade training and import-export trade activities, their content remained rooted in the early stages of China's reform and opening-up policy. At

the beginning of the 21st century, with rapid economic growth in China, comprehensive business Chinese textbooks emerged<sup>[15][16][17]</sup>. The textbooks primarily revolve around themes, offering diverse and captivating exercise formats.

Since the 21st century, there have been significant changes in publishing mediums and content, posing various challenges to the publication of business Chinese textbooks. To address this issue, Zhang Yongyu (2004) analyzed existing issues in the compilation of Business Chinese textbooks, such as the limited quantity, narrow scope, outdated content, and outdated conceptual frameworks, filling the gap in detailed research on Business Chinese teaching materials<sup>[18]</sup>. Furthermore, Jiang Guoquan (2016) offered suggestions from the perspectives of resources, talent, platforms, aiming to actively respond to the opportunities and challenges in the publishing of Business Chinese textbooks<sup>[19]</sup>.

### ***3.2. Research on Compiling Business Chinese Textbooks***

Although research on Business Chinese textbooks started later and is less abundant compared to other types of Chinese language textbooks, previous studies of Business Chinese textbooks have also achieved some notable results. Li Yimin's (1999) paper is the first to specifically study the conceptualization and compilation of international business Chinese textbooks<sup>[20]</sup>. Subsequently, Yuan Jianmin (2004) defined the characteristics of business Chinese courses and proposed four principles for compiling textbooks: scientific, practical, targeted and interesting<sup>[1]</sup>. Scholars have examined the evolution of business Chinese textbooks from the perspective of Chinese language learners' proficiency levels, elucidating the importance of incorporating "differentiation" into the design of business Chinese textbooks. They emphasize the fundamental goal of cultivating students' Chinese communication skills and cross-cultural awareness which highlights the practicality of business Chinese textbooks<sup>[21][22]</sup>. Regarding the developmental issues of Business Chinese textbooks in the new era, Cao Jin (2015) identified the insufficient integration of "language" and "business" as a prominent issue in the compilation of Business Chinese textbooks, suggesting a need to enhance the professional aspect of "business"<sup>[23]</sup>. Liu Jiahui (2023) emphasized the importance of refining the selection of content in Business Chinese textbooks based on learners' personalized needs and advocated for deeper exploration of the potential differentiation in Business Chinese textbooks to achieve sustainable promotion<sup>[24]</sup>. The aforementioned studies have provided conceptualizations of the future direction and principles of compiling business Chinese textbook from a theoretical perspective.

### ***3.3. Research on Specific Elements of Business Chinese Textbooks***

In terms of the composition of language elements in business Chinese textbooks, scholars analyzed the key points of vocabulary items arrangement in business Chinese textbooks<sup>[25][26]</sup>. Xin Ping (2007) conducted a combined quantitative analysis of vocabulary quantity and proficiency levels in textbook based on the "Business Chinese Examination Syllabus"<sup>[27]</sup>. Anna and Shi Zhongqi (2011) quantified the vocabulary coverage of seven Business Chinese textbooks, thereby establishing preliminary thresholds for vocabulary selection rates in Business Chinese teaching materials<sup>[28]</sup>. In addition to language elements, scholars have also studied how to integrate cultural elements into textbook exercises. In the realm of pragmatic cultural aspects, Liu Naihua (1998) proposed five dimensions for the normativity, argumentativeness, vagueness, implicature, and strategic nature of business negotiation language in order to better establish benchmarks for the compilation of Business Chinese textbooks<sup>[29]</sup>. Zhao Yanhua (2010) analyzed the revision of projects in elementary Business Chinese textbooks from the perspective of communicative functions<sup>[30]</sup>. Li Linli (2012) discussed the selection of texts in comprehensive Business Chinese textbooks from a stylistic perspective, suggesting the use of typical discourse found in business activities as exemplary texts for student learning<sup>[31]</sup>. These scholars explored the role of textbook exercises in cultivating learners' cross-cultural communication abilities, thereby enhancing learners' cognition and understanding of Chinese culture.

### ***3.4. Comparative Study of Different Business Chinese Textbooks***

Researchers often select multiple similar textbooks and, starting from the perspective of textbook compilation, conduct comparisons to analyze the applicability and effectiveness of different exercises in various learner backgrounds. As the first comprehensive monograph to conduct a thorough study on the series of Business Chinese integrated course textbooks, Ni Mingliang's (2015) comprehensively analyzed and discussed Business Chinese teaching materials after conducting comprehensive examinations of 22 individual textbooks and 12 series of textbooks<sup>[32]</sup>. Besides adhering to the general

principles of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, textbooks should also take into account the characteristics of Business Chinese itself.

#### **4. Research on Exercises of Business Chinese Textbooks**

Since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been a gradual increase in literature concerning the research of Business Chinese textbooks. Among these, the study of exercises has gained increasing attention from scholars. Specifically dedicated discussions on textbook exercises mainly emerged after 2000. Prior to this, research on exercises was often discussed alongside studies on textbook compilation.

The study of exercises in business Chinese textbooks is typically regarded as a branch of research within the broader field of business Chinese textbook analysis. Several articles have discussed related content from a principled and overarching perspective. Yang Dongsheng (2003) identifies the principles for developing exercises in Business Chinese textbooks: (1) Evaluating students' proficiency in Chinese language and emphasizing practical business knowledge and transactions. (2) Given the rapid updates in Business Chinese, exercises should cover current affairs topics. (3) Emphasizing the training of students' critical thinking skills<sup>[33]</sup>. Zhang Yongyu (2004) suggests that it's essential to move away from structure-centric models in the exercises for Business Chinese textbooks, such as focusing solely on characters, words, or sentences, and instead prioritize exercises that emphasize semantics, pragmatics, discourse, and communicative training. Additionally, complementary materials for classroom use should be developed, including self-study textbooks, student workbooks, and teaching reference materials<sup>[18]</sup>. Jiang Guoquan (2009) argues that exercises are a crucial component of each lesson in Business Chinese textbooks, alongside overviews, common sentence patterns, annotations, examples, and common vocabulary<sup>[22]</sup>.

Through the collection of the relevant literature mentioned above, there is still a lack of specialized research on exercises in Business Chinese textbooks. The scarcity of research achievements in exercises for Business Chinese textbooks, especially for specific lesson types, is evident, with specialized research on exercises in Business Chinese textbooks primarily appearing in some graduate theses. Xu Suping (2011), by analyzing the writing principles and exercise design of Business English textbooks and comparing them with "Experiencing Chinese (Business Edition)" and "Corporate Chinese," pointed out that there is room for improvement in the conceptualization, content, and format of exercises in Chinese Business textbooks<sup>[34]</sup>. However, specific improvement methods were not suggested. Wang Shan (2012) conducted a comprehensive investigation into exercise design and arrangement in several Business Chinese textbooks from different periods. Five intermediate-level Chinese comprehensive course textbooks published in the past decade were selected as research subjects and offered reflections and suggestions regarding the quantity and types of exercises in Business Chinese textbooks<sup>[2]</sup>. Chu Chengmiao (2019) conducted exhaustive statistical analysis and comparison of exercises in "Crossing Business Chinese - Advanced Comprehensive Course" from three aspects: quantity, types, and skill-based exercises and provided reflections and suggestions on exercises in business Chinese textbooks<sup>[35]</sup>.

#### **5. Research trends and future prospects**

Exercises in business Chinese textbooks play a vital role in teaching. Textbook practice of business Chinese should be distinguished from general Chinese practice. However, there is a big gap between the existing business Chinese textbooks and the general international Chinese textbooks in the number and types of exercises, as well as the research on the composition and design of exercises. This finding highlights the potential for further development and reinforcement of practice in business Chinese language textbooks. The optimization of the exercise design of business Chinese textbooks can be started from the following three aspects:

First, utilizing multimedia technology to design diverse and authentic exercises. Through the use of multimedia techniques to simulate real-world scenarios from textbook exercises, learners are immersed in the intricacies of business communication. Rather than merely providing a template in textbooks, complementing the exercises with multimedia resources - such as video tutorials demonstrating proper Chinese email etiquette or recordings of sample conversations - provides learners with a tangible grasp of language nuances and professional protocols. In addition, the envisioning exercise allows Chinese language learners to analyze multimedia rich case studies, dissecting complex business dilemmas

depicted through video, images, and audio recordings. This immersive approach not only improves language skills, but also develops critical thinking and problem solving skills to help them tackle real-world business challenges.

Second, implementing project-driven exercises. Innovative methods such as project-driven exercises can completely change the face of business Chinese teaching materials and provide learners with a dynamic and attractive learning experience. Each project in textbooks can be carefully designed to immerse students in real business tasks, and students may embark on a project to develop a marketing strategy for a Chinese company to explore international markets, or negotiate a business partnership. Learners are tasked with activities - from conducting market research and drafting business proposals to drafting persuasive presentations and participating in cross-cultural exchanges. Through these hands-on experiences, students not only hone their language skills, but also develop critical thinking, collaboration, and problem solving skills. For example, Jiang Guoquan (2009) suggests combining exercises such as context-tailored business letters with alternative exercises to provide learners with hands-on opportunities to apply language concepts to real-world situations<sup>[22]</sup>. A wide range of business model examples, such as company introductions and contract templates, can be presented and accompanied by corresponding exercises to enhance understanding and application. By employing project-driven exercises, business Chinese textbooks not only motivate learners, but also make them active participants in the language acquisition.

Last, incorporating emotional elements into instructional exercises. Business Chinese textbooks can incorporate emotionally resonant entrepreneurial success stories, transforming learners from passive observers into active participants in the business world. Through these case studies, students can gain profound insights into the struggles, challenges, and achievements of entrepreneurs. Additionally, discussions on how a Chinese company overcame difficulties in cross-cultural communication, ultimately achieving multinational cooperation through a deep understanding and respect for the customs and values of other cultures, can be included. Such exercises not only raise awareness of the crucial role of cross-cultural understanding in the business environment but also cultivate students' international perspectives and cross-cultural communication skills.

## 6. Conclusion

In summary, research on international Chinese language textbooks since the 1990s, particularly focusing on exercise design principles, has provided valuable guidance for the practice of teaching Chinese internationally. Research on Business Chinese teaching textbooks mainly focuses on three aspects. Firstly, it emphasizes macro-level principles guiding the development of textbooks, including overarching principles that shape the organization of these materials. Secondly, it examines specific exercise formats in different textbooks, analyzing characteristics such as vocabulary, themes, and exercises from the perspective of question types or course structure. Finally, there is comparative research between specific textbooks to identify similarities and differences among individual or multiple Business Chinese textbooks. Most textbooks follow traditional models of international Chinese language teaching, with insufficient integration of business knowledge and language skills. While there has been some research on the arrangement of vocabulary and grammar items in Business Chinese textbooks, exploration of the quantity of exercises and setting reasonable thresholds is scarce. Furthermore, how to effectively differentiate the content and methods of exercises in Business Chinese textbooks from internationally recognized Chinese language textbooks remains a fundamental question worthy of further consideration.

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